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IN TOUCH WITH THE LAND

Images of Connecticut
Farm Life, 1937-1985



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IN TOUCH WITH THE LAND

Images of Connecticut
Farm Life, 1937-1985

by Alberta Eiseman and Dr. Herbert F. Janick, Jr.

Historic Photographs reproduced from the Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress
Current Photography by Bill Quinnell
Exhibit and Catalogue Design by Joseph Johnson Smith

Exhibition sponsored by the Connecticut State Library

Funding by the Connecticut Humanities Council

Additional Support:

National Endowment for the Humanities

Ætna Life and Casualty

United Technologies Corporation

Homer Babbidge Library, University of Connecticut

Connecticut Department of Economic Development

Connecticut Department of Education

Printing of this brochure made possible by Ætna Life and Casualty

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INTRODUCTION

The plight of the American farmer has captured the public consciousness of late. Farming has suffered a dramatic decline throughout the United States during the last half century and Connecticut is losing farmland at a faster rate than any other state. Each year, thousands of acres, where crops used to grow or cattle browsed, are transformed into shopping malls, industrial parks and housing subdivisions. Farmsteads that once supplied a family's livelihood are sold to people who prize open space but commute to work in nearby cities.

Yet there remain more than 4,300 farms in the state, marketing some \$321 million worth of products. Thousands of farm families find enduring appeal in rural living and struggle against increasing odds to retain their traditional ties to the land.

How do these families hold out? What trends affect them? How has rural life changed over the past half century? This study seeks to answer such questions by exploring the lives of some of the men and women who continue to devote themselves to agriculture in the state.

Inspired by a remarkable collection of photographs taken some 50 years ago, this publication and the accompanying exhibition follow a group of rural families across five decades, highlighting, through their experience, patterns of change and continuity in Connecticut farm life. The exhibition presents historic photographs as well as recent images. In this publication, family histories based on extensive interviews supply additional detail, revealing a gallery of strong willed, resourceful people who struggle with the realities of farming in a small, intensely developed state.



THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION PHOTOGRAPHS

The original photographs in the exhibit, some of which are reproduced in this booklet, were taken during and after the Great Depression, as part of a wide ranging effort to document the face of rural America. The Farm Security Administration (FSA), an agency of the New Deal created to assist the small farmer, hired a group of gifted photographers and charged them with recording rural problems and the agency's response to them. The project was directed by Roy E. Stryker, a former economics instructor at Columbia University who had pioneered in the use of photographs in education. Starting in 1935, Stryker sent such camera artists as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Ben Shahn to photograph migrant workers, sharecroppers, droughts, dust storms and bread lines. The searing images they produced, reprinted in magazines, newspapers and books, dramatized the plight of rural America and the need for the agency's work.

Gradually the number of FSA photographers increased and the scope of their work broadened to include more positive aspects of rural life: rich harvests and close families, pastoral landscapes and small market towns. By the time the project disbanded in 1943, 75,000 captioned photoprints and 1,600 Kodachrome transparencies had been produced and preserved at the Library of Congress, forming one of the largest and most renowned collections of documentary photographs in the world.



New England was frequently a new photographer's first assignment. One after another, FSA recruits responded to the beauty of Connecticut's landscape with vivid images of shade grown tobacco, of harvest markets, rocky fields and of the state's diverse population.

In September 1940, a young FSA photographer named Jack Delano drove from Washington with his new bride, Irene, armed with a detailed shooting script and specific instructions to emphasize the symbols of autumn and to represent the ethnic variety of the people. Traveling around the state in the car that was a wedding gift from his in-laws, Delano carried out his assignment but wrote to Stryker that "there's so much other stuff here that's so swell that I hate to tie myself down and say that I must leave at such and such a time . . . I am wondering if one

drawer in the file is going to be enough for little Connecticut," he continued, adding that "if the weather stays as it is, you can have all your autumn scenes and I'll be able to squeeze in a few of my 'farmer and his wife' as well."

Jack Delano's portraits of Connecticut farm families form the centerpiece of this study. Because Delano identified his subjects by name and locality, it was possible, a half century later, to locate some of the families by consulting agricultural agencies, town clerks, land records and old time residents. Surviving family members were then interviewed and photographed anew. The stories that emerged — told around kitchen tables, in barnyards or in flower-filled greenhouses — reflect the satisfactions and the setbacks, pressures and conflicts that buffet the rural family today.

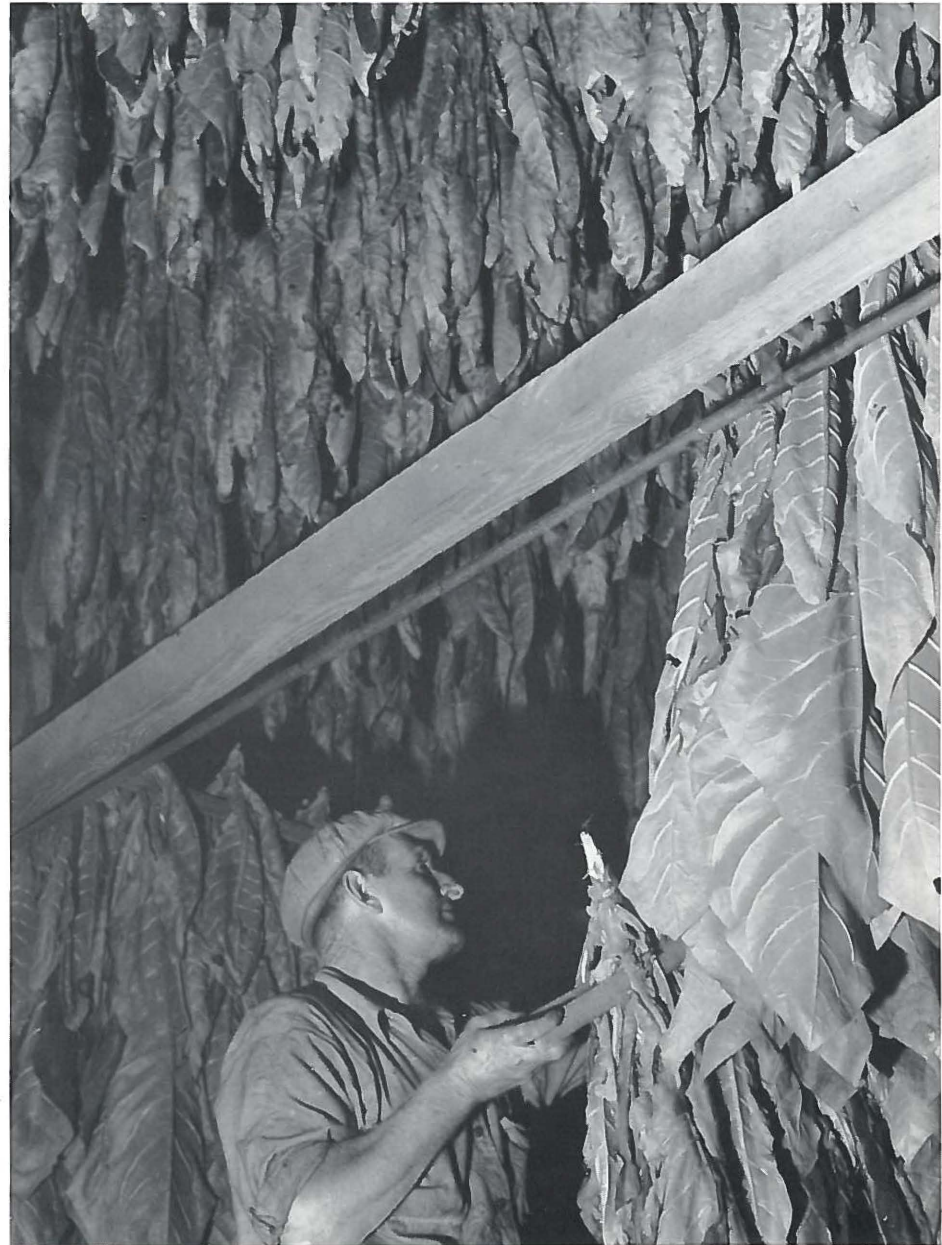


A FARM PRESERVED FOREVER

The first story concerns one tract of land and the two families who, each in its turn, cared for it, drew their sustenance from it and insured that it would remain forever farmland. The saga of this scenic land in West Suffield unfolded on a recent weekend morning as seven of the ten sons and daughters born to Hazel and William Andrew Colson gathered at the old homestead to reminisce. None of the members of the Colson family are in farming today; the land was sold after Mr. Colson's death to Stanley Falkowski, a neighbor who added it to his own dairy operation. But the Colsons remember well the days when they worked on the farm "before and after school, weekends, holidays . . . you grew into your job, depending on your age."

Laughing and groaning as they describe the rituals that governed the growing of tobacco, they recall starting the seed beds in spring, and the weeding — "as soon as you were big enough to know the plant from the weed. And you'd be doing it Memorial Day when everybody else was out playing!"

"When the plants were four to five inches tall, you'd pull them out," relates William, known as Bub, the eldest son, "put them in baskets and plant them in rows — straight as an arrow. That was Dad's pride and joy, to have a straight row. I've seen him harrow out a whole row that wasn't straight. He used to say he wanted to be able to top his tobacco with a rifle."



As Bub recounts the myriad steps required by this demanding crop, his sisters Beatrice, Gertrude, Elsie and Ernestine and his brothers Earl and David (two of the brothers passed away and one of the sisters lives in Pennsylvania) break in with details about their early years. Their parents were born and brought up on neighboring farms, they relate, and when they married in 1921 they purchased their own acreage and a house built in 1860, for \$23 and a long-term, \$9,000 mortgage.

"Father used to say 'always keep a mortgage because they can't take that away from you' " his family says. He cleared the woodland and established a tobacco and dairy farm, with eighty cows that provided steady income year round. Tobacco was a gamble, they explain. Some years, they made money on it, other years prices were so low they couldn't even sell it. But milk was far more stable.

The only time the children were ever permitted to skip school was for tobacco baling. "Every September, there would be a call over the school loudspeaker 'Earl and Elsie Colson, would you please come down to the office, your father wants you!' " Elsie says with a laugh.

When the tobacco was ready, it would be cut by hand, the entire stalk, then taken to the tobacco shed to be hung up to dry. Then, in late fall, each leaf had to be stripped off the stalk and tied in bundles of thirty-five to thirty-six pounds. And everyone would work right through the night in the sheds, by lantern light.

Buyers would come around from Hartford and New Haven during the stripping, to look over the crop. They'd take a leaf and put it up to their cigar — "they always smoked cigars" — and actually burn a hole in the leaf, "to see how the burn was. And you'd

have to let them, because it would be your bread and butter."

The buyers would offer whatever the going price was that year. "When we were real young, it was sometimes five or six cents a pound. Other years, it might be 50¢ or 82. In 1952, I saw a check come in here for tobacco for \$12,000," William recalls. "I felt as though I was a millionaire, and it wasn't even my money!"

Prior to that, there had been difficult years, times when the Colsons almost lost their farm. After the Farm Security Administration was instituted, the family was able to borrow money and eventually to pay it back.

"I remember Ma saying they would never have made it during the Depression if they didn't have a farm," Elsie relates, and Gertrude adds "We always had food on the table — we ate a lot of chicken because we raised it, and we wore hand-me-downs a lot. I remember one time the church brought us a basket of food. Beatrice and I were insulted because we didn't need it!"

But when one of the younger sisters says that they were never poor, the oldest shakes her head.

"She doesn't remember that there certainly was a little bit of poorness. The worst time was when we thought we were going to lose the house. I cried myself to sleep at night, and in the morning going to school I remember thinking that we were going to have to move, and where would we move to."

"We were poor in the sense that we didn't have any money, and we had to work all the time," William interjects, "but we had everything of value — food and a home and people that we liked and cared for us."

As they were growing up they would all hire out to work on one of the many farms that used to flank Ratley Road, where, now-

adays, ranch and split level houses alternate with old homesteads. Thirty-eight dollars for a whole summer's worth of driving riggings was big money for a twelve-year-old boy. And girls, at age fourteen, might earn as much as \$10.75 sewing tobacco.

Gradually, after some of the boys went into military service, Mr. Colson auctioned off most of his cows but continued to grow tobacco, a crop he liked and smoked with enthusiasm. Even after the older boys got jobs with the state and Beatrice went off to study at New Britain Teachers College (now Central Connecticut University), they would come home and help out on the farm at busy times. But when both Mr. and Mrs. Colson needed medical care, they sold off some acreage fronting on Ratley Road, for building lots. And when the parents died, their sons and daughters decided to retain the homestead, owned by the youngest sister, Ernestine, but sell the major portion of the property to Stanley Falkowski, owner of Cedar Brook Farms, less than a mile away on the same road.

"We all love the outdoors," explains Beatrice Colson Phelps. "When you were born on the land, you don't like to get away from it. But farming was so difficult when we were home, we all found other things to do."

When Stanley Falkowski added the Colson's acreage to his own, he fulfilled his dream of running a self-sufficient dairy farm. "Stash" grew up on his father's farm, which was devoted to tobacco, bought it from him in 1960 and immediately started adding land and buying cows. Tobacco was dropped right away. "I don't like anything about it," says Falkowski. "How it grows, what it's used for or how it smells."

Stash and his wife Barbara, a teacher, built their own ranch house as well as several out buildings, including a sawmill. "We try

to be as self sufficient as we can," Barbara explains. "You have to be, in farming."

They raised two daughters and a son, and for two decades they made a good living from their 200 acres and their herd of 150 cows. Daughter Joy helped her dad with the milking all through her high school days. "Those were good years," Stash says. "But when Joy went to college, I had to hire help. That really did it."

The poor quality of available help, plus personal health problems, as well as the complicated economics of dairy farming, forced Stanley Falkowski to sell most of his herd in 1984. He is keeping about thirty cows which will be sold when they are old enough for milking. "We're not in the milk business any more," Barbara asserts.

Falkowski is eloquent on the difficulties of farming today. "If a dairy farm is not in high debt over equipment. If you don't have to pay interest on the farm. If you do it all yourself . . . you can still make a living," he explains. "But you work seven days a week. Anyone in the milk business with high debt is in a real squeeze; you could spend half a million on cattle and equipment alone," he continues. "Then if you have to borrow to put in a crop, you have real problems. The margin is so narrow! The cost of feed is high, the price of milk, low. We buy retail and sell wholesale, you might say. A farmer handles a lot of money but at the end of the year, it just isn't there."

"All our friends are farm people," Barbara adds, "and I see how they struggle. It's just not fair."

"The only thing you have is your equity in the land," Stash continues. "If you sell it for real estate, that is." But that's the one thing the Falkowskis do not want to do.

In 1978, as soon as the state of Connecticut enacted legislation establishing a Farmland Preservation Act, the family applied to have the state purchase the development rights to their property. After a wait of almost six years, while officials evaluated and appraised the farm, it was found eligible for inclusion in the program, one of twenty-seven farmsteads for which funding has been approved. As a result, the Falkowskis retain ownership of their property and can pass it on to their children or sell it for farming or open space, but it can never be developed or converted to non-farm use.

By selling the development rights — the difference between the value of the land for agriculture and its fair market value — the Falkowskis may have sacrificed the larger profit they would have realized on the open market, but they have gained a measure of security that has enabled them to experiment with a variety of uses for their property. Stash planted sixty acres of corn — "It cost me \$10,000 in fertilizer, seed corn and weed killer. I had a hell of a job getting it back," he relates. They also put in thirty acres of ornamental pumpkins, which turned out

very well, and 5,000 Christmas trees, which will be ready for harvest in a few years. Daughter Joy, who holds a responsible position at Union Carbide, has started a dried flower business in her spare time.

They have even found a way to utilize their land in the winter. As soon as the first snowflake falls, Cedar Brook Farms is transformed into a ski touring center, with ten kilometers of groomed trails, expert instruction, a warming hut built by Stash, equipment sales and rentals — the entire enterprise developed and staffed by members of the family. Begun as a hobby seven years ago, after Barbara discovered the pleasures of cross-country skiing, the center draws several hundred skiers on weekends and holidays and can be profitable, if the weather cooperates. "Like a milk check without a grain bill," Stash quips. "You've got to be diversified in farming today," say the Falkowskis.

DISPLACED BY AN AIRPORT

During the 1930s and early 1940s, when Farm Security Administration photographers were crisscrossing the country, a large proportion of Connecticut's farmers were immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Arriving at the peak of mass immigration, the newcomers labored on established farms and estates until they could purchase their own property, often marginal land abandoned by earlier farmers.

One of the immigrants was Andrew Lyman, who came from Lithuania when he was twenty and went to Enfield, because one of his sisters had settled there. His name in Lithuania was Namunous, relates his son, Andrew Lyman, Jr., but the local town clerk found it difficult to pronounce, so it was changed to Naman, then to Wyman and finally to Lyman.

Lyman, who died in 1967 at the age of eighty-six, had not been a farmer in his youth. He had been an iceman and then worked in a foundry. After suffering serious burns in an accident he decided to emigrate. Once in Connecticut, he was hired by a wealthy family in Suffield, where he worked in exchange for room and board. In later years, he would recall sleeping in the barn, and being fed only apples and raw milk. "He used to say he never had enough to eat," says his son, "and he spoke of young immigrants like himself as being slaves."



Eventually Lyman found work in the tobacco fields and by 1918 he had saved a few hundred dollars, which bought him twenty acres and an old farm house in Windsor Locks, where Bradley International Airport is today. Tobacco was his main crop, but he also kept four or five cows, some pigs and chickens and a team of horses for the plowing. In winter, he would work in a tobacco factory and set aside his earnings to buy seed for the spring. There were good years and bad, his son remembers. During World War II, when the price of tobacco rose, Lyman was able to rent additional acreage and lease extra tobacco sheds from other farmers.

Then, during the mid-1950s, the State of Connecticut decided to build an airport half way between the cities of Springfield and Hartford.

"The state tried to get the land as cheap as it could, and there was even talk of condemnation," says Andrew Lyman, Jr. "But we had it appraised, and we got to talking together. They came up a few thousands, and in the end they paid a fair price for it. That's better than going to court."

It took ten years before the new airport needed the Lymans' land, so father and son leased it, and continued to farm. Then Mr. Lyman, ready to retire at 85, moved in with one of his four daughters and Andrew, Jr., who was married in 1963, moved to his wife, Helen's, home in nearby Somersville, on the dairy farm that her Polish-born parents had bought in 1931.

Helen and Andrew Lyman work the farm along with their son Tom, but all of them hold outside jobs as well.

"You can't make a full-time living out of farming," Tom maintains. "People have gone broke doing it."

His father is not so sure. "If you don't spend too much, you could," he says. But for the next few years, until retirement, he will

continue to hold down a night job at a nearby warehouse, while Helen, who has worked for the state for thirty-six years, does bookkeeping at "the college," as she calls the nearby prison facility. Tom is "into diesel," having recently completed a year's training on tractor trailers.

Together, they farm their fifty-five acres plus two hundred more that they lease. Their major crops are hay, corn, vegetables, melons and pumpkins. Some years ago they fashioned an attractive roadside stand out of an old carriage, and from July until frost they sell their produce to customers from nearby towns. There is no need to advertise. "People know we're here," Andrew says. They are well known for their melons, and they boast that Governor O'Neill tasted one and pronounced it "delicious."

The Lymans sell some of the hay and corn they raise to other farmers and use the rest for their own herd. They keep anywhere from twenty to thirty head of cattle, milking cows as well as beef, plus a 2,000-pound bull named Mischievous, a horse named Dolly, several dogs, cats and numerous strays, such as a pony they found in the watermelon patch and some sheep that "a neighbor didn't know what to do with."

The beef cattle are brought to the slaughterhouse and sold to customers, whole or half. For a while they raised pigs, but Andrew found it did not pay. "All people want today is the bacon, the ham and pork chops," he explains. "They don't know what to do with the lard and all the other parts. In my father's house, everything was used: the head, the ears, the pig's feet, the heart, lungs, liver, the intestines for making sausage."

Another reason why they no longer keep pigs is the worry that the farm will smell bad. "Some farms are really messy and dirty," Lyman says, "and then the neighbors get hot about it and try to keep a man from

farming. I try to keep mine as clean as I can, but you can't have a farm without sometimes having an odor."

The Lymans' farm is in an area that is becoming suburban. From a slight rise behind their picturesque barn one can see neat, new homes on the horizon, and behind a stand of trees edging the property, a tract of land is being subdivided for condominiums. They all feel threatened by these developments.

"People move in because they want a view of open space," Helen says angrily, "but then they don't like what goes on on a farm. They say the farm stinks, but the meat on their table doesn't stink!"

"People drive over here just to see our fields of pumpkins," adds Tom. "But once they've bought a house, they want the farmers out."

The Lymans would like to see their land protected by the state's preservation program, but have not yet ascertained whether it's possible, or whether it would, in fact, resolve their problems.

Another obstacle is the town's taxation policy, which calls for assessing farmland as though it were building lots. Andrew, who plans to appeal his tax bill, insists that it's Helen who wants to continue farming. "If it weren't for her, I'd never do it. I'd say to hell with it," he maintains.

Yet he plans to "stay right here" when he retires from the warehouse and continue to work on the farm and on their home. The house — "I have been working on it since we moved here in 1963," Andrew says — is a much-remodeled eighteenth century structure that was once a Shaker country store, a way-station on the old stage coach route.

And as for Tom, when asked if he plans to keep on farming, his reply is "What else is there?"

THREE GENERATIONS ON THE LAND

Rarely does a photograph reveal its subject's inner strength as forcefully as the portrait of Mrs. Mary Smith by Jack Delano. When Delano portrayed Mrs. Smith in 1940, she had been widowed and was running a tobacco farm in Enfield with the help of her seven children. Born in Poland, she had married a man of German birth. Together they had purchased twenty-seven acres and an old farmhouse that was part of Enfield's Shaker legacy. Her husband's premature death at thirty-eight did not prevent Mrs. Smith from holding on to the farm. Even after her second marriage to a man who had a job in town, she continued to grow and market tobacco for many years, until her sons left home and found work elsewhere, and farm labor became increasingly difficult to find.

Of all her children, only one, John Swols, now works the land. After ten years spent in an aircraft factory, he started raising corn, tomatoes and vegetables on land previously devoted to tobacco, and on additional acreage adjacent to the home he acquired after his marriage. Subsequently, he built his first greenhouse and started growing annuals and vegetable plants, which he sold at a small roadside stand.

"That's where the money is," he explains, "and it's much more pleasant than tobacco."



A tall, soft-spoken man, Mr. Swols has devoted the past three decades to this work, and continues despite major surgery. He sells retail and wholesale around the state. Flats of marigolds, begonias, impatiens, coleus, alyssum form vivid patterns on the floor of a half dozen greenhouses, as they wait to be delivered to the dealer who will distribute them to supermarkets and nurseries. What started out as a small produce stand has become Johnny's Roadside Market Garden, an extensive vegetable, fruit and plant store owned and operated by the Swols' daughter Linda.

Linda and her sister Lorraine grew up "working the stand" since childhood. In time, both developed other career interests, but Linda, who trained as a medical secretary and worked for five years at a prestigious institution in California, came back to help her father and found that it was right for her. "The stand gives me a chance to be my own boss," she says, "and I like that."

She opens the stand, as they still call the store, in time for Mother's Day and closes it October 1, although most similar businesses don't close until Halloween. "Business is slower in October," she explains, "and the summer help has left because of school. And I hate being cold," she adds.

During the five months of business she starts working at 4:00 or 4:30 in the morning, seven days a week, in order to be ready for a 9:00 A.M. opening. Closing time is 7:00

P.M. Several days a week she drives to markets in Hartford and Springfield to buy locally grown vegetables — whatever her father doesn't grow. She also drives to Boston to buy fruit. It's a much longer drive and they don't load the truck for her as they do in the two smaller markets. "But I like Boston much better," she explains, "because there is much greater variety of produce."

Pointing to an International Harvester truck bearing their logo, she describes the startled looks she gets when market people see a young woman behind the wheel of the powerful truck. "By now they've got to know that I've got plenty of muscle!" she says, laughing. Even so, by the end of the season she is tired enough so she has to take someone along to help her load the truck.

"From October to January I take my leisure time," she relates, "and then I get a job — in a hospital or with a doctor. And I also work for my father — I'm always working something!"

Walking a visitor through a succession of greenhouses, she explains the procedures for growing the various kinds of plants: the annuals which her father starts from seed; geraniums which he buys as cuttings and plants in four inch pots; corn, tomatoes, vegetables and flowers for cutting, all of which are grown in the fields.

"January is when he starts the annuals," Linda explains. "All through January he plants seed, all day long. That's a

one-man show, you know. After the seed germinates, the little plants get transferred from one greenhouse to the next, because each greenhouse has different amounts of heat and light. And then by May, they're ready to be sold." She points to pyramids of rich brown dirt. "He buys good loam and adds all kinds of things — makes up his own planting mixture."

He used to grow greenhouse tomatoes, too, so he'd have them ready to sell long before the field grown ones are ripe, but they caught a disease, and he has had to wait ten years for the soil to be free of it. "There's not many farmers who grow greenhouse tomatoes," she adds. "The fuel bills to keep the greenhouse warm enough are astronomical."

The high cost of heating greenhouses and the difficulties of getting help are major problems. Mr. Swols and his wife, who works with him, consider themselves fortunate in having a young man who works full time and two Puerto Rican ladies who have been with them for several seasons at the busiest time. Linda hires two full-time people for the stand. "It's mandatory that they work weekends," she says, "so there aren't that many applicants to choose from."

She recalls that her grandmother would help out at the stand in her later years, after she stopped running her own farm. "Grandma would walk the half mile from her house to the stand, before she died in 1974. She was some worker!"

For the last several years, Linda has lived in her late grandmother's home, first by herself and recently with her new husband, a "city boy from Chicago," who seems to enjoy her way of life. The house, still flanked by a tobacco barn and several other farm buildings, was built during the early nineteenth century by members of Enfield's historic Shaker community. They, too, were farmers, pioneers in the conservation of natural resources and the first people in the United States to package garden seeds, in 1802.

Linda is in the process of repairing and restoring the old farmhouse in the appropriate style, and proudly quotes one of her uncles who stopped by to see her work and told her "Grandma would approve."

She says she found out during her years in California that she never wants to stay any place where she cannot advance. "I am a quick learner and I could have been interested in that work if there was promotion. But I also like being my own boss. I am here now, and I like it. You have to like it to work this hard," she adds, laughing.

"My father keeps saying 'this is my last year,' " she continues, "but he keeps doing it. And as long as he keeps doing it, I will be helping him. I don't know what I would do if he stops. Would I take over the farm? It's hard work, but it's not bad. You're always out in the sun." And then she adds, "I guess, if we all admit it, farming is in our blood."



A FARM IN THE CITY

Until the expansion of the suburbs in the 1950s, Connecticut's major cities were ringed by a tapestry of fields and orchards. Even within city limits, small farms prospered. The section of New Haven known as Westville was home to numerous truck farms, including one purchased in 1935 by Giacomo Simone.

Mr. Simone had come to the United States in 1910 from the province of Bari, in Italy, worked in the New Haven area for some years and then returned home to serve in World War I. By 1920 he was back in New Haven with a bride. At first, the couple lived in an apartment on Oak Street, in the immigrant section of New Haven which was later demolished to make way for urban renewal.

Giacomo Simone did construction work, helping to build several Yale buildings. On \$17.50 a week, the couple raised seven children and set aside enough money for a down payment on a house with eleven and a half acres on Valley Street. This was an area at the foot of West Rock that was all woods and farms, owned largely by Italian families.

"My father decided to buy the farm so all of us would have work to do despite the Depression," explains Solly, the oldest son. Solly's name was originally Saverio, but his first grade teacher thought that was hard to say, and to this day he is known as S. Solly Simone.



"We had a two-story, wooden farm house, one of three identical ones," he relates, "and the Testa family, who owned the farm across the street, gave us the mortgage. The Farm Security Administration supplied a loan for starting up the farm," he continues. "Valley Road was a dirt road back then, without electricity or running water. The WPA (Work Projects Administration, one of the New Deal's earliest agencies) put in sewers while we were living there, and the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) would clear off unwanted trees and leave them lying there, so we could use them for firewood."

From the very beginning, Solly was in charge of the farm. "I was classified as farm manager at the age of sixteen," he says with pride. Meanwhile, his father continued to work in construction, sometimes during the day, sometimes at night. "That's the way it was then," Solly reflects. "There were so many people out of work, that if you didn't want a job there were five to take your place."

When there was little work to do, Giacomo Simone spent time sculpting fanciful pieces in concrete, and embroidering pictures on patriotic themes, some of which are now family heirlooms.

The family grew lettuce, celery, tomatoes and especially beans, "a good wax bean that produced 150 to 200 bushels a day," says Solly, who became known as the Wax Bean King. "It was a beautiful bean seed," he recalls. "We used to buy it a bushel at a time. And then all at once it disappeared right off the market — some kind of crop loss. If we had known, we could have left a ten-foot row and we would still have the seed."

Solly would take the produce to the Silver Street market in New Haven by horse and wagon, because he was not old enough to get a driver's license. He would start out at 2:00 A.M., take care of his business and be back by 8:00 or 9:00 A.M., then get ready for the day's picking.

"We made money," he recalls, shaking his head, "but the days were just too long."

All the children helped out on the farm. Sister Mary was the fastest, the champion bean picker. At certain times of year, when there was planting, hoeing or harvesting to do, they might have four or five people working for them.

"People would come to work just for the food," Solly remembers. "Then came World War II, and they could get much more money in war factories. That started even before the United States entered the war; 1938, '39, things started to change. That's when large growers began importing Jamaicans and other migratory workers."

Reminiscing about the early days on Valley Street, Solly speaks of the help provided by the Farm Security Administration. "They used to sell lime at a dollar a ton, to build up your soil. They would buy seed potatoes and other produce seed all at once, to keep prices down for the farmer. They would hold meetings one evening a week at the homes of different FSA clients, in order to

discuss mutual problems. And if nobody there knew the answer, the FSA agent would know where to get the information."

Then, in 1941, when "we had just built up the soil to where we wanted it, and the farm was really starting to get in shape," the federal government decided to build a low-rent housing project on Valley Street. "They said 'you sell, or we'll condemn'" Solly recalls.

When the Simones were forced to sell their farm, they bought a house on twenty acres in West Haven. "What the government paid for Valley Street was just enough to buy the West Haven property," says Solly, still angry at the memory, "but not enough to get the land in shape."

They tried growing crops for several years but the soil was not productive enough. "We continued to raise produce for the family," Solly recalls, "but not as a business."

Meanwhile, Solly had married Madeleine, "a city girl, but one who always had a backyard garden," she explains. In 1949 they started to build themselves a house on eight acres of the family's land. Ever since then, while Solly's brothers and sisters moved away and Mr. Simone gradually sold off parcels of land, Solly and Madeleine have improved their property, adding buildings, experimenting with crops, trying new ventures. For a while they raised turkeys and chickens — "I spent my honeymoon with 500 turkeys," Madeleine quips — until an infectious disease wiped them out. They tried an egg route. The youngest of their six children, Debbie and Scott, used to cover the neighborhood, delivering from house to house with their little red wagon. Then, because Madeleine enjoys house plants, Solly brought home as a surprise a greenhouse bought at auction for \$100 — "two trailer-

loads of stuff," he explains. They now have six greenhouses, all home built, in which she grows bedding plants and house plants. Under a contract with the schools, she grows small house plants, each with a single blossom, so every child will have one to take home on Mother's Day.

Solly helps her, but he insists that "she's the boss. It's her business." For many years he worked as a mechanic for Yale University, then took early retirement and launched his own refrigerator service company, from which he retired a few years ago.

"I am still interested in farming," he explains. "I still attend all the farm meetings, and stop at all the seed places to see what's new." They have an extensive vegetable garden for their own use, as well as fields of corn and tomatoes which customers come to pick. They plant new trees each year, just for the pleasure of it, and every season they try out a new crop, avoiding the use of any pesticide.

None of their children plan to continue farming. Debra teaches history of art to college students and lives across the street, on the ground floor of an old barn that her father remodeled. She enjoys helping her parents, when she can, but explains, "We know how hard farming is, that's why we don't want to do it. Teaching art history is much easier."

Today, Solly and Madeleine's property is a small oasis less than a mile from a commercial strip. Around it are suburban homes and an extensive wooded area that will soon be the site of a large private hospital. Resilient and busy, the Simones do not seem threatened by impending change. It's possible that land values will go up, they explain, and besides, their privacy will be protected. The corporation has promised to leave the acreage surrounding the hospital in its natural state.

A UNIQUE FARMING COMMUNITY

The history of agricultural settlement in the United States is filled with instances of religious and ethnic groups who formed their own distinct farming communities. Connecticut is one of a handful of states that can point to several Jewish farm settlements, notably one that flourished in Colchester during the early decades of the century.

Photographer Jack Delano captured Colchester's Jewish population while it was still a self-contained community engaged mostly in poultry and dairy farming. Today, some of the large poultry combines that characterize the eastern section of the state are owned by people with their roots in that community. For the most part, however, the descendants of the original settlers scattered to nearby cities to pursue non-farming careers.

Delano's photographs focus on Anna and Abraham Lapping, who bought their farm in October 1918. Both were natives of Latvia. Like most of Colchester's Jewish farmers, they had come to the United States to escape the poverty and persecution prevalent in eastern Europe. They landed in the United States as newlyweds and settled in New York City, where Mrs. Lapping worked in a millinery factory. She was the breadwinner; Mr. Lapping had been a farmer in Europe and could not get accustomed to the ways of the city. A devout Jew, he spent his days reading, studying and yearning for his own piece of land. On her days off they would search for a farm they could afford. Finally they found property in Colchester, which had a small Jewish settlement and a synagogue where Mr. Lapping could worship.



The Lappings lived on Old Hebron Road until they died, he, in 1943 and she, two decades later. At that time their only son, Paul, who had a business in New York, sold the family property to the city of Colchester for a recreation area.

Paul Lapping passed away in 1984, shortly before the start of this study. From interviews with relatives and former neighbors, Abraham and Anna Lapping come to life as a devoted, unusual couple, rooted in a community that has been described as "one of the two or three most noteworthy Jewish efforts to build a farming community in America."

The first few Jewish settlers came to Colchester in the late 1880s, at a time when residents were moving away in droves due to the closing of the Hayward Rubber Company, the town's major employer. Farmsteads were going begging, a magnet to newly arrived immigrants anxious to escape the crowded tenements of New York.

In their efforts to settle on the land, the newcomers had the support of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, an organization founded by a German Jewish philanthropist, Baron Maurice de Hirsch. The Fund, which later spawned the Jewish Agricultural Society, aided several settlements in eastern Connecticut: Chesterfield, Oakdale, Montville and Colchester, offering the assistance of trained agents as well as financial aid. The land records of the town of Colchester hold page after handwritten page listing the Fund as mortgage holder for newly purchased farms.

The influx of Jewish farmers stemmed the decline of the town's population. During the peak period of Jewish settlement, between 1910 and 1925, half of Colchester's residents were Jewish.

By the time Anna and Abraham

Lapping bought their farm, Colchester had a well-established synagogue, a Hebrew cemetery, a small kosher slaughterhouse and a "mikvah," or ritual bathhouse, institutions without which an Orthodox Jew like Mr. Lapping could not survive.

A former neighbor remembers "old man Lapping" as "very religious, quiet, very honest. I remember him just like you see in that picture — big white beard, rubber boots up to the knees. He took very good care of his animals, Mr. Lapping did," says Sidney Einhorn, owner of Einhorn's Hardware Store and a former poultry farmer and feed company owner. "He had the best cows, but not many," he continues, "never more than ten or twelve. He didn't need much cash to make a living."

Mrs. Lapping's niece, who spent every summer of her childhood at the Lappings', also recalls her uncle and his cows.

"He was always buying cows whether he could afford to or not," she relates. "Every cow had its name — Bessie, Tessie, they all ended with 'essie,' and he knew each one."

Colchester residents remember Abraham Lapping driving a horse and wagon to deliver his milk to a cooperative in nearby Amston. In winter, he would deliver by sled. His niece recalls that, as an Orthodox Jew, he would not ride to the synagogue on Saturdays but would walk over a mile, twice a day. "He was a saint," she says. "He never smoked, yet he did not object to others smoking, even on the Sabbath. And having his picture taken went against his beliefs. I'm surprised he allowed one to be taken."

In the Colchester area, it soon became a practice for farmers to supplement their income by renting rooms to boarders in the summer. Men and women who worked in city sweatshops would scrape together enough money to spend a week or two on a

farm. Sometimes the farmer would add rooms and the farm might grow into a rooming house, or even a hotel. By the 1920s, Colchester had emerged as a summer resort, with upwards of 4,000 Jewish visitors in a season, according to accounts written at the time.

The Lappings had two small outbuildings which they rented to families from New York City or New Haven, with a shared dining room and kitchen where guests prepared their own meals. They were provided with fresh eggs and corn, beans, peas and other vegetables grown on the farm. One of their former boarders, a New Haven physician who used to summer at the farm as a child, remembers how much he enjoyed feeding the chickens, collecting eggs and milking cows during his stays.

Despite the additional income and hard work, the Lappings were frequently in debt. Mrs. Lapping's niece remembers that her aunt would borrow from a man named Agronovitch, one of the town's wealthier residents, and from a bank in Hartford. She used to sell her eggs to individuals and restaurants in New Haven, through relatives who delivered them in person. During the winter, Anna Lapping would frequently go back to New York to resume her millinery work. Paul went with her, but Mr. Lapping always stayed on the farm in the company of a hired man named Sam, who lived with them for many decades.

Every so often Mrs. Lapping went to Hartford, to the bank. She would walk out to Route 2, which was completed in 1921, and hitch a ride. Once she was picked up by Chase Going Woodhouse, the pioneering Congresswoman from Connecticut's second district. The two became good friends, with the result that Old Hebron Road got electricity ahead of other areas.

"She was a most remarkable woman," says her niece. "If she had known how to read, write and speak English correctly she could have been president of the United States!" Mrs. Lapping's imperfect knowledge of the language did not prevent her from writing to President Woodrow Wilson during World War I, pleading with him not to take Mr. Lapping into the army because he was needed on the farm.

After her husband's death, Anna Lapping stayed on in the old house. She sold the cows, but continued to take in summer boarders. Colchester grew and changed, as the growing number of automobiles and highway improvements enabled residents to commute to work in cities such as Hartford, Middletown, New London or Norwich.

The rate of Jewish settlement declined, despite the arrival, during the 1950s, of about twenty German and Polish families, left homeless by the ravages of persecution and war. Today, Jewish residents comprise about 10% of Colchester's population of 7,500. Most of the children and grandchildren of the "Yankee Jews," the original immigrant farmers, went off to college and then moved to other areas.

As Colchester grew into a bedroom community, real estate values underwent a sharp rise. Town officials realized the need for open space that could be set aside for baseball fields, for tennis and basketball courts, to insure that future generations would have ample space for recreation. The Lappings' farm seemed perfect for the purpose, close to the town center yet away from downtown traffic. And so, after Anna Lapping died, in 1970, her son sold the old farmstead to the town.

"My uncle would be happy about that," says Mrs. Lapping's niece. "He would have approved the sale of his land for such a purpose."

EGG FARMING IN CONNECTICUT

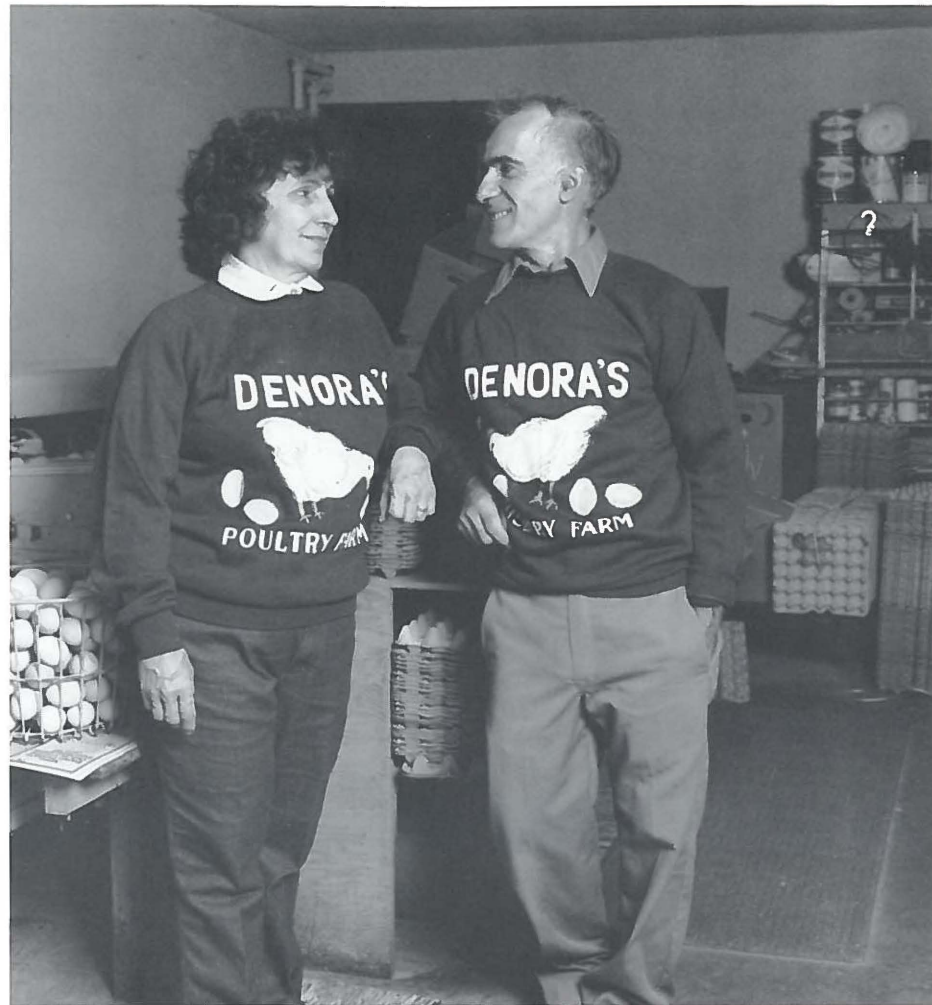
The only aspect of agriculture in which Connecticut is self-sufficient today is egg farming. More than a billion eggs a year are produced in the state, most of them by large poultry conglomerates in the eastern part of the state. A few family-run egg farms still exist, however. One of them is DeNora's Farm in Colchester, a town that was sometimes called the egg capital of New England.

Mr. and Mrs. Constantino DeNora bought the farm in 1931, and they still live there. The chicken operation belongs to their son, Michael, and his wife, Anne, but until his ninetieth birthday Mr. DeNora, who is now ninety-one, still helped grade eggs an hour or two every morning, and cut the grass around the old farmhouse.

The DeNoras emigrated from the province of Bari in 1927. He was a farmer in Italy, where his family grew barley, wheat and other crops. Upon landing in the United States the young couple settled in New York, and for some years Mr. DeNora was in the ice and coal business with his brother.

"We kept thinking that if we set aside a little bit of cash, and buy a farm, maybe we could make a living," Mrs. DeNora recalls. They followed newspaper advertisements until they found a dairy farm that sounded right for them. "My husband came to see it and he did like it, because there was electricity," she says.

They purchased thirty acres and a much-remodeled nineteenth century house, on a dirt road flanked by poultry and dairy farms only a mile or so from the town cen-



ter. There was no running water at the time. When water was brought in, in 1940, they first installed it in the dairy barn and only later, when they could afford it, into the house. They had eight or nine cows whose milk they sold; they grew hay for the herd and

vegetables for the family, and kept a few chickens on the side.

"I was always telling my husband, 'cows are too much work' " recalls Mrs. DeNora. "Let us sell the cows and go in the chicken business."

After some years they followed her advice, taking a loan from the Farm Security Administration to transform the cow barn into a chicken house and make other improvements. Little by little they enlarged the old house to make it comfortable for their four growing children. As their flock of chickens increased they also added new chicken houses.

"We did make a little money," Mrs. DeNora says, "thank God it worked out all right. But we worked very hard. It's a very hard life," she continues. "There's no time for a little vacation, you're not free to go anywhere."

Real estate values rose over the years as Colchester expanded. The family had many opportunities to profit from its land and did, in fact, sell a few acres to people who wanted to establish roadside businesses. But unlike most of their neighbors who sold their property for building lots, the DeNoras have kept most of their acreage and stayed on.

"I have children," Constantino DeNora always said. "Maybe some day they will want to do something with the land. Let it stay the way it is."

His three daughters married and moved to their own homes, but Michael, a skilled carpenter and builder, wanted to keep the farm. He built a ranch house of his own next to his parents and took over the chicken business when his father decided to retire. He also converted the old farmhouse to two apartments, an upstairs one for rental and one for his parents on the ground floor.

Michael and his wife, Anne, run the egg farm together. He works from early morning until 1:00 P.M., then does carpentry for a number of customers. Anne is busy with

their chickens and eggs all day long, seven days a week. Four times a day she gathers eggs, then washes and grades them and packs them into boxes to sell to customers.

They have 7,000 laying hens in three houses, producing some 4,000 eggs a day. A large poultry business would have 100,000 birds in one house alone, Mike explains. "What determines the number of eggs is the age of the birds. As they get older, they slow down in production."

They sell retail and wholesale, to individual customers, roadside stands and nearby restaurants. They also sell to former farmers who no longer have their own flock but still have egg routes and act as distributors.

The DeNoras used to have an egg route as well; their son and daughters grew up delivering eggs in the neighborhood. But the children are all out of the house now, pursuing other careers. "When Mike and I stop farming, it will be the end of the line," Anne says. "Nobody wants to work seven days a week. If you have crops, you can take off a day once in a while, but if you're involved with animals you can't. This is ridiculous!" She laughs as she describes the chicken-sitting arrangements she had to make with her two daughters just so she and Mike could go and visit their son for the weekend.

To make their work more pleasant, Mike has built a spacious egg room across the driveway from their home, equipping it with an egg-washing machine, a sorting machine, an adjoining "cold room" where eggs are stored and also a bathroom. "I barely have time to run across to the house during the day," Anne explains.

A sliding door gives way to the most

recent chicken house, where a chorus of cackles greets any intruding visitor. Unlike new-style egg farms, where hens are packed in like proverbial sardines, these birds are free to roam about between their feed and their water troughs, or to fly up to a perch to lay their eggs. It's called "loose housing," Mike explains.

Customers walk in and out, forty to fifty a day. On weekends, many come from Hartford and buy as much as twenty dozen at a time. "They buy for their friends and neighbors," says Anne. "They come every two weeks, just like clockwork." Even cracked eggs have their own special customers, who buy them at reduced price for cooking and baking.

The DeNoras buy their chicks at twenty weeks of age from Bob DeCloux, a hatchery man in Norwich; he, in turn, gets his breeders from Arbor Acres Farms, a world renowned concern.

The DeNoras buy their feed in bulk, one ton for every thousand chickens, every week, and then pump it into each of the chicken houses.

Mike says he learned his carpentry skills by building the chicken houses. He started in 1936, as a young boy, and kept adding to the first building until he put up a second one in 1953. The third one, to which he later added the egg room, was begun in 1955; the date is scratched into the cement floor.

Their poultry farm is the only one left on a street where there used to be six. As in most other branches of farming, the larger enterprises are gradually pushing out the smaller ones. But for now, Michael and Anne DeNora are staying in, devoted to their way of life despite the hardships.

IN TOUCH WITH THE LAND

The sagas of these rural families, followed across three generations, illuminate the problems that face the Connecticut farmer. The study reflects the displacement brought about by advances in transportation, with highways and airports vying for land once used for growing crops. It shows how technology is affecting traditional methods, as in today's intensive poultry farming; how cultural changes like the decrease in smoking affect the economy of an entire valley. It illustrates how decisions made by federal officials regarding price and distribution of milk control the future of local dairy farmers. It reveals urban and suburban growth endangering agriculture, and how the spiraling price of land presents each family with the dilemma of whether or not to sell.

Two threads run through these narratives: the individuals' devotion to the land and to the rhythms of nature, and their commitment to an independent style of life. These enduring ties inspire farmers to experiment with different crops; to sacrifice potentially larger profits by joining the Farmland Preservation Program; to start new agricultural enterprises that cater to today's different markets.

Although statistics show that farming is in retreat, it must be remembered that this region still has an important agricultural base. A surprisingly large number of Connecticut's people still farm and derive spiritual nourishment from remaining in touch with the land.



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE



The first United States Census ever taken, in 1790, recorded that 90% of the people of Connecticut were farmers. Today, fewer than 1% of the state's three million residents are engaged in agriculture. This contrast illustrates the decline in the importance of farming in Connecticut's economy. However, it obscures the persistence of agriculture in this urbanized state that still produces all of the eggs, half of the milk and one-third of the vegetables consumed by its residents.

The first settlers of Connecticut, attracted by the flat land and sandy soil of the central river valley, made agriculture the foundation of the colony's economic and social life. Connecticut farms produced mostly for their own use, with only small quantities of grain and meat raised for export to the mother country. After 1750, the colony was drawn into the thriving trade with the West Indies and the southern colonies

that was transacted through such ports as Middletown, New Haven and New London. Enterprising farmers, eager to increase the production of meat for this market, pushed into the eastern highlands and western corner of Connecticut, where heavier clay soil supported lush pasturage for their herds.

The industrial revolution that reached New England in the early nineteenth century brought an end to the dominance of agriculture. Textile mills sprouted along streams and rivers, providing alternative, and more lucrative, employment for many farmers. Canals and, later, railroads opened up fertile lands west of the Appalachians, which acted as magnet for ambitious sons of Connecticut farm families.

Technology changed the nature of the state's agriculture in other ways. Expanding railroads tied Connecticut into a national market where it could not compete with the

cheaper farm products of the vast prairie, far more suited to mechanized commercial agriculture. In 1860, more than half the surface of the state, 1.8 million acres, was under cultivation. This record figure began to shrink in the years after the Civil War, when the burgeoning industrial cities of Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport and Waterbury siphoned off farm population.

Connecticut agriculture ultimately adapted to the realities of a market economy. Local farmers no longer attempted to grow wheat and other grains that were raised in bulk by western states. The invention of the refrigerator car made it superfluous for the state to produce large quantities of beef and pork. Rather, resourceful local farmers began to specialize in growing perishable crops that could be consumed in nearby cities. One-crop farms of large size replaced diversified, subsistence operations. Mar-

ginal land was abandoned in favor of intensive cultivation of the more fertile Connecticut River Valley. During the nineteenth century dairying, particularly the marketing of butter and milk, assumed the primary position that it retains today, accounting for 34% of the state's farm income. In the hills of eastern Connecticut, farmers, many of them recent immigrants from Europe, discovered that thin soil was no handicap when it came to producing poultry and eggs that found a ready market in urban areas.

During the twentieth century Connecticut farmers faced a different challenge. Improvement in transportation, especially the mass production and use of the automobile, led to expansion of the cities into the surrounding countryside. Massive suburban migration, first visible in the 1920s, hit a peak in the 1950s and '60s when farmland was gobbled up for highway construction, tract homes, shopping centers and decentralized corporate headquarters. Statistics highlight the change. In 1920, 61.6% of the state's land surface was devoted to farming. Forty years later, the amount of land in agriculture had dropped to 28.2%. Today, the figure is less than 14%.

The fate of tobacco culture, long a staple of Connecticut agriculture, illustrates this process of urban diffusion. The flat, cleared, well-drained basin of the Connecticut River that had been used for tobacco growing since the seventeenth century, presented low development costs to entrepreneurs eager to

accommodate Hartford residents and companies ready to move to the suburbs. Ranch houses replaced farms in towns like Bloomfield, whose population exploded from less than 6,000 in 1950 to almost 14,000 a mere fifteen years later. In 1985, the population was estimated at 19,500. A huge distribution warehouse replaced fifty acres of prime shade grown tobacco alongside Interstate 86 in Manchester in 1978. The amount of land devoted to outdoor tobacco cultivation fell from 9,500 acres in 1950 to less than 1,300 acres in 1979. Production of shade grown tobacco plummeted by 60% between 1966 and 1977. The introduction of synthetic cigar binder, high taxes and labor costs, and the decrease in cigar smoking for health reasons, all contributed to the decline in production, but it was the attractive price offered the landowner by the developers that was primarily responsible for the shift in land use.

Connecticut farmers continue to be resilient. Although the number of farms in the state has dropped steadily, from 22,000 at the end of World War II to 4,300 today, several counter-trends have recently emerged. First, the number of farms has risen slightly since the mid-1970s. It is an intriguing fact that while large farms continue to disappear, farms of less than 50 acres have *increased* in number. Operated by part-time farmers, whose primary support comes from other jobs, these farms, in the opinion of a Census Bureau expert, represent "as much a way of life as a business." Another significant development is that many farmers have

adapted their output to the needs of an urban and suburban population. Nursery and greenhouse production for both the retail and the wholesale trade has become the third largest source of farm income in the state, replacing tobacco growing in importance. The quantity of fruit and vegetables raised in the state, much of it harvested by the customers themselves, has also increased.

The State Department of Agriculture has responded to this upward trend by sponsoring the "Connecticut Grown" program to encourage the development of new farmers' markets and promote existing ones. It also publishes directories of roadside stands and of farms where consumers can pick their own produce.

Perhaps the most important step taken by the state toward stabilizing its agriculture is the Farmland Preservation Program, initiated in 1978. Under the provisions of the enabling act, the state has, so far, purchased the development rights to twenty-two farms, with funding approved for five others and hundreds of applications waiting to be processed. More than 6,000 acres of prime agricultural land have been protected from commercial and residential development and will remain forever in farm use. The program has been criticized as being insufficiently funded and falling far short of the need. It is, however, an essential step, one that encourages farmers to persevere and promises to preserve, at least in part, the agricultural legacy of Connecticut.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project such as this owes its existence to an extraordinary number of people. We wish to acknowledge, at the outset, the unstinting cooperation received from the families we interviewed. We thank the Colsons, Falkowskis, Lymans, Swols, Simones and DeNoras for welcoming us into their homes and sharing with us the story of their farms and of their lives.

In our early attempts to locate families photographed in 1940, we received the assistance of many farmers and staff members of both state and federal Departments of Agriculture. We are especially grateful to Nicholas Testa and Francis M. Lutwinas. Our search for information on Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Lapping, both deceased, led us to Colchester, where Robert Feldman, Sidney Einhorn, Zeke Liverant and Barbara M. Brown aided our quest. Esther Melnick and Dr. M. L. Sumner of New Haven shared reminiscences of their childhood visits with the Lappings.

The task of researching the Farm Security Administration Collection at the Library of Congress was lightened by the advice and help of curator Beverly W. Brannan. The staffs of the Photographic Archives at the University of Louisville, Kentucky; the Homer Babbidge Library at the University of Connecticut; the Western Connecticut University Library, the Connecticut State Library and especially the Westport Public Library were most generous in their assistance during the many months of research that preceded the opening of this exhibit. We were fortunate to have the editorial guidance of Joanna Foster.

Jack Delano, the Farm Security Administration photographer responsible for most of the pictures we selected, sent additional material from Puerto Rico, where he now lives and works. His cooperation and encouragement were most welcome.

In closing, we want to thank the staff and membership of the Connecticut Humanities Council for their generous support, both financial and spiritual.

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